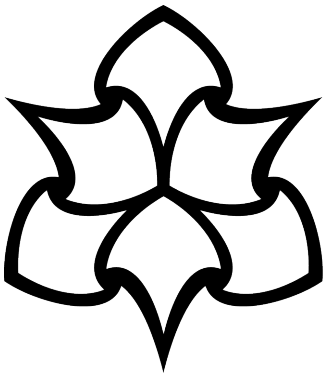

Converging Lines: Needlework in English Literature and Visual Arts

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A testament to a woman's patience, the cross-stitch canvas illustrating this special issue of E-*Rea* is drawn from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1868 oil painting, *Il Ramoscello* (Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum). The completed canvas was given as a gift; through its physical presence as well as symbolic resonance, it obliquely introduces some of the issues discussed in this volume. First, the image is not a painting but a three-dimensional object that is meant not only to replicate the original painting but also to enhance its fine pictorial details and transform its materiality: seen from up close, the finest details of the girl's dress and the transparent, gauzy quality of the lace that are hardly visible in the original painting are transmuted by the golden thread used to stitch; seen from afar and framed like a picture, the completed canvas – with its colour and detail simplified by the medium and stitching scheme

– may not rival the original painting, and yet strangely echoes Rossetti's initial wish to "write on the image" and unfold the story of the depicted woman by adding verbal lines to his brush strokes (cf. David Latham's *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, x). When the artist originally painted the portrait in 1865, the picture was entitled *Bella e Buona* ("Good and Fair") and was paired with a poem of the same title. It was meant to be part of a sequence of three poems and pictures, among them the famous *Bocca Baciata* (1859) – a turning-point in Rossetti's pictorial art, it aimed to emulate the sense of touch and feel as much as the sense of vision, just as textiles and needlework foreground texture and touch. Within the decade following the production of such single portraits featuring women, and frequently framed by companion poems, Rossetti was to take part in the foundation of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company (1861), later the now internationally famous Morris & Co. (1875). There, through the relentless efforts of William Morris, needlework not only was recognized for its commercial value but for its artistic potential alongside stained glass and book printing, leading to the Arts and Crafts movement.

In its materiality, the Rossetti reproduction as a cross-stitched canvas can on the one hand be seen as a slightly kitsch, nostalgic memorabilia pointing back to the original painting and to the pre-Raphaelite movement. On the other hand, it can also be considered as symbolizing later artistic developments in the Arts and Craft movement, as well as exemplifying the 21st century revival of domestic, handmade crafts; bringing together the traditional and the hyper-modern, 21st century stitchers can now download pattern charts of such paintings to then stitch by hand. This particular piece, having been made by a woman's hand and given as a gift,[1] reflects key arguments running through this special issue, particularly in relation to gendered acts of making and charity. Like the cross-stitch artefact, this volume of essays operates on multiple levels. It first concentrates on revisiting the Victorian period through the lens of recent feminist criticism to explore the relation between needlework (an umbrella term covering the distinctive crafts of sewing, embroidering and knitting), literature and the visual arts. Then, it moves beyond the Victorian period into the 20th century, investigating the ways in which needlework has diversified and expanded to accommodate new artistic modalities and literary demands. Finally, with a focus on interdisciplinary and collage-based approaches, it considers needlework now, in the 21st century.

The majority of the articles in this special issue of *E-rea* were first presented at the ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) conference at the National University of Ireland,

[1] The work was stitched by Patricia Kaye Ritacco to whom we dedicate this volume.

Galway in August 2016.[2] They formed part of a panel session on "The Finer Threads: lace-making, knitting and embroidering in literature and the visual arts from the Victorian age to the present day," chaired by the volume editors. The other contributions have been selected from responses to the subsequent call for papers for this special issue. As a whole, the edited volume addresses the relationship between needlework, fiction and visual arts, but several underlying themes also run parallel to the main topics. These additional tropes emerged organically within the individual contributions; collectively, they reflect major recent developments in literary criticism and broader cultural studies.

1. Gender roles and femininity

First among those is the issue of gender and femininity. A running thread in most of the articles, it evinces the lasting impact of second-wave feminist criticism on today's interpretation of women's artistic and literary productions. While most Victorian scholars are familiar with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classic study of femininity, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979), and its influence sits subtly beneath many of the articles collected here, the most cited source in the present volume is undoubtedly Roszika Parker's pioneering book, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984). This influential analysis of the development of needlework and embroidery as a symbol of femininity reframed scholarly debate about needlework in the same way that Gilbert and Gubar changed perceptions of women in Victorian literature and culture. Starting with the observation that "from the eighteenth century, embroidery is repeatedly used to signify femininity," Parker convincingly shows how novelists employ embroidery to comment on the position of women in society, going as far as stating: "Embroidery in Victorian novels is a signifier of femininity which is revealed as a mode of behaviour demanded by masculinity" (7, 165).

In the new introduction to the second edition of her book, Parker sums up the main argument she initially developed, but also insists on the dual face of embroidery:

> Historically, through the centuries, it has provided both a weapon of resistance for women and functioned as a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to the

[2] Mary Burke and Carine Kool, who contributed to the panel, kindly shared links to the expanded versions of the papers they presented as these have been published elsewhere. The former is in the *Journal of Design History* as "The Cottage, the Castle, and the Couture Cloak: 'Traditional' Irish Fabrics and 'Modern' Irish Fashions in America, c. 1952-1969" (doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epy020) and the latter in *Koregos* as "La broderie, un art révolutionnaire?" (www.koregos.org/fr/carine-kool-broderie-art-revolutionnaire/13182/).

> norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence. (xix)

In the same fashion, several contributors in this collection of essays take up her feminist stance to demonstrate how women used their needles either to express their subservience to the dominant male figure or show a form of resistance to their supposed superiority. In this regard, it should be noted that the generic terms "needle" and "needlework" used throughout the volume refer to a range of distinctive practices, from the most basic daily activity of darning, sewing and knitting to the more complex textile production embodied in skilled embroidery (or "art embroidery") or even in multimedia games based on embroidery. This use of simplified terminology was a conscious decision, made to show a continuum from one form of practice to another and offer an overview of the various kinds of needlework that coexist alongside each other, and sometimes overlap in a single piece. This broad use of the needle also allows for an implicit linking to other needlework practices which may or may not use needles, such as lace work or crocheting, that are not addressed in this volume. The generic term of needlework is used to better investigate the relation between text and the other fabric that is being examined in these essays – that is, the literary text, bearing in mind that both terms, "text" and "textile," derive from the same Latin origin, *textilis* (meaning woven). However, this is not to say that each type of needlework requires the same degree of skill or level of education but rather to underline the common threads uniting each practice and to explore the nature of the frontier between text, textile and hypertext, on the one hand, and paper, canvas and web on the other. In this respect, even though most authors in the volume chiefly follow Parker's lead in focusing on women and identifying the female artist with the needle because of the scope of their study, important elements should be borne in mind to nuance the picture given in our volume: first among them is the gender of the needlework practitioner.

It is a historical fact that men such as sailors (mending their fishing-nets) and tailors also wielded needles of their own, a practice prolonged into the 20th century by fishermen as much as by fashion designers and revived by artists belonging to various artistic movements from the French "peintres-cartonniers" Marc Saint-Saens or Jean Lurçat in the mid-fifties to Peter Jacobi or Josep Grau-Garriga who belonged to the international circle of Fiber Art that developed over the 1960s and 1970s (Constantine and Larsen). Interestingly enough, the main issue raised in those artistic practices is not so much a gender issue as the issue of the

hierarchy of genre that seems to have favoured painting over textile productions – and the questioning of the autonomy of the work of art.

In our volume of essays, the main looming male figure, who also militated in favour of the recognition of needlework as an art form, is William Morris, whose multi-talented skills he expressed through designing embroidery, tapestry or wall paper patterns as much as through poetry and prose writing. A keen pattern-designer and promoter of embroidery, his research into medieval tapestry led to the revival of ancient practices such as the use of hand-woven looms that went against the grain of an increasingly mechanical age. Among his most influential writings, the 1877 lecture he delivered before the Trades Guild of Learning, London, entitled "The Decorative Arts" and published in 1882 as "The Lesser Arts," built on John Ruskin's principles and ideas on the interconnectedness of the arts to encourage craftsmen to value their craft as much as any form of art. In this lecture as much as in his later writings, Morris demonstrates that even if each branch of art requires a particular talent or skill, writing poetry is perhaps closer to weaving than to painting; as noted by more than one contributor to this special issue, this problematizes the then-accepted notion that painting is a higher art than textile arts, and that poetry was deemed the highest form of literature. Beyond the famous line attributed to him, that *"*[i]f a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry he had better shut up," the crucial idea that Morris developed in the course of his own career, and that also connects all the essays in our volume, is the idea that, beyond gender divide and the dichotomy between pen and needle, male creativity and female reproductive function, men and women often worked hand in hand in completing projects (Mackail 192). Such was the case in the embroidered linen frieze with silks, wools and gold thread from Chaucer's *Romance of the Rose* that William Morris conceived with Edward Burne-Jones in 1874 – a project completed over several years by Lady Margaret Bell and her daughter Florence Johnson who stitched the work. Within the Firm started by Morris and his business partners, many women were also involved, starting with his wife Jane, Elizabeth Burden (Jane's mother), and his daughter May, whose writings and artistic achievements so markedly influenced the recognition and teaching of embroidery as an art (cf. Kathy Rees's article).

As Lynn Hulse remarks in the foreword to the catalogue of a recent exhibition dedicated to May Morris, *May Morris, Art and Life* (William Morris Gallery, London, 7 October 2017- 28 January 2018),

> May was a key exponent of art embroidery, the champions of which sought to overturn the Victorian obsession with Berlin work, a form of shading in cross stitch or tent stitch that lacked both manual dexterity and aesthetic subtlety; in so doing, art embroidery elevated needlework from a domestic craft to a serious art form. The earliest textbook on the project, *Art Embroidery* (1878), asserted "[t]he first condition of an ideal work of art is that it should be conceived and carried out by one person: division of labour is fatal to distinction and individuality". May Morris is the embodiment of that paradigm, and her output is testament to her creative skills both as designer and maker. (7)

The other aspect that May Morris's engagement with needlework entails is the close association between the pen and the needle, writing and stitching, text and textile, as illustrated in the *June* frieze she designed and embroidered in 1909-1910, in which she mixed pictorial elements with gothic script lines borrowed from her father's "June" poem in *The Earthly Paradise* and from Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh's "May day" verse (Bain, Lister and Mason 136).[3]

In this instance as in many earlier examples of women's productions featuring letters and stitches, there is a strong sense that these women worked at the intersection of drawing and painting, writing and sewing. As Susan Frye writes in *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (2013),

> they saw the needle, the pen, and the pencil or brush as interrelated tools because women for the most part perceived their products – writing and needlework, designing and painting – as separate but related forms of expressions. (9)

In our edited volume, the emphasis similarly is placed on the conjunction between text and textile to produce meaning and derives from a parallel observation that the wish to write or design a piece of needlework stems from a common urge to tell a story. In this way, as Frye notes,

> Texts and textiles are connected not only through the stories that both tell but also through an underlying philology that describes the ways in which texts are rooted in material production. […] Traditionally, women wove or embroidered cloth to

[3] The *June* frieze can be seen here: www.wmgallery.org.uk/collection/search-the-collection-65/june-embroidered-frieze-f102-c-1909-10/.

> communicate a story, as in the tradition of the raped Philomela who made her story into a "tedious sampler" (*Titus Andronicus*, 2.4.39); that is a piece of elaborate wrought needlework. (14)

Indeed, this conceptual link is deeply embedded in our culture, as exemplified in expressions like "spinning a yarn" for telling tales. This turn of phrase also brings to mind the collaborative cultures of needlework, where women (and men) come together to work, but also for pleasure – "spinning a yarn" evokes the image of one person telling a tale to entertain others while they make fabric yarns together, which will then join other yarns and threads to make a piece of needlework.

2. From textualities to textility – the fabric of meaning

A timeless form of expression, the weaving of cloth into a given pattern articulates a particular type of discourse and constitutes "encoding ways of seeing the world" or recording it (Frye 14). Recent investigations into the power of textiles to convey memory and emotion, for example as showcased in the exhibition *Threads of Feeling* (Foundling Museum, 2010-2011), have shown that a challenge for the critic confronted with textile artefacts is to reconstruct meaning from the objects themselves – a difficult task that textile researchers address using extant objects, paintings, letters, diaries, newspapers, and parish records while using a range of disciplinary approaches. In the same way, several contributors in our volume significantly focus on woven artefacts such as alphabet samplers or canvas work for exploring literary codes as much as modes of self-expression. The process here is two-fold: eliciting meaning from the object itself in an attempt to recover its full value – that is, not only its market value or its purely sentimental (or affective) value but a combination of both – and unravelling the complexities of the daily experience of making, observing and recording.

In recent years, the "material turn" in cultural and literary criticism (and so-called "thing theory") has encouraged renewed interest in objects. This is a most welcome return to the "artisanal," the unique, hand-made object as trace and record of an individual's creative impulse. As art curator and historian Jean-Paul Leclercq suggests, this revival of interest in objects and crafts has opened up new alleys of thinking about cultural history that may change our approach towards the past as ongoing. [4]

[4] For a bibliography of Leclercq's articles, see *Perspective 74*. On text and textile, see Blanc 2008, 53-74.

Instead of looking at the inert object and trying to recreate the past, the idea is to think through the prism of the given object and look ahead towards its "becoming" (to use a Deleuzian expression). In his field of expertise of textile studies and technology, Leclercq thus invites the viewer to think through cloth ("penser par le tissu") and reflect on fibres in terms of structure and patterns rather than isolated objects. Such an approach entails thinking about objects beyond the moment of their emergence and adding a diachronic dimension to their interpretation that closely allies the woven object with the literary text. It also implies that history is dynamic and that technology may not lead changes as much as undergo the changes initiated by changes in social practices.

At the same time, contemporary philosophical inquiry on the nature of making has also led to a much more inclusive and dynamic view of fabric. Going back to Aristotle's hylomorphic model of creation distinguishing form (*morphe*) from matter (*hyle*), anthropologist Tim Ingold pleads for a broader view of making that would restore the balance between form and matter, the woven and the non-woven that he refers to as "textility". In his article "The textility of making," he convincingly argues that "[p]ractitioners […] are wanderers, wayfarers, whose skill lies in their ability to find the grain of the world's becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose" (92). Showing the similarities between the weaver and the carpenter, since the latter's "making was itself a practice of weaving: not the imposition of form on pliant substance but the slicing and binding of fibrous material," Ingold reformulates the major assumptions made by Lacan and Merleau-Ponty on the relation between the subject and the object to suggest that the perceiver and the perceived object together make meaning (92). Interestingly, the metaphor he uses refers to weaving as he writes: "In this endless shuttling back and forth between the mind and the material world, it seems that objects can act like subjects and that objects can be acted upon like subjects" (94). Using Bruno Latour's important work on objects, he also envisages that objects and subjects are connected in relational networks (95). Taken together these two theoretical frameworks serve the "textile turn" that is perhaps under way, an avenue which the contributors to this special issue are each exploring through the use of various methodologies.

3. Victorian Threads

The first section, on British needlework of the mid-19th century, opens with Róisín Quinn-Lautrefin's "'[T]hat Pincushion Made of Crimson Satin': Embroidery, Discourse and Memory in Victorian Literature and Culture." Starting *in medias res* with the close analysis of a

striking red embroidered pincushion, the author demonstrates how textile crafts, as embodied forms of production, have allowed women to insert and imprint their contributions in history. Coupled with its aim to "explore the various ways in which Victorian women's needlework in general, and embroidery in particular, has acted as a space of reflection on time, history and memory," this article sets the tone for the volume as a whole with recurring tropes of (re-)production, the body, memory, history and the feminine in relation to textile arts. The first section of her enquiry describes various kinds of needlework exercised during the Victorian period from plain sewing to fancywork, which is the focus of her attention. Fancywork, she argues, "acted as an alternative mode of production, a metonymic female locus rivalling the larger space of industrial production identified as male." She then goes on to show how the fashion for Berlin wool work and fancywork in general was framed by two types of discourse – one advertising it as an age-old tradition, the other valuing it as contemporary and unrivalled personal pass-time aimed at creating unique souvenirs:

> Because they suppressed the ubiquitous, interchangeable commodity in favour of the rare, individual souvenir, craft practices allowed makers to experience a sense of authenticity in their methods of production, ownership and exchange.

The second section in her article develops this argument further and underlines the value of needlework for bequeathing a discursive legacy. Among the items Quinn-Lautrefin examines, the most striking piece is a sampler stitched with red thread whose emotional charge conveys the urgent, although ambivalent, desire to confess and tell, to hide and be mute. A unique and moving piece of evidence, the artefact is as memorable as Esther's scarlet letter in Hawthorne's famous novel and outlines the first figure that the collection explores: the woven text as private testimony and public manifest.

Building on the dichotomy between the private and the public sphere, Pamela Gerrish Nunn's contribution, "The Needle and the Brush: a Victorian Drama," revisits issues relating to the "Woman Question" by showing the prominent role played by needlework in its various forms in the Victorian home as much as in Victorian society. Starting with the satirical periodical *Punch*'s reactions to the foundation of the Society of Female Artists in 1857, her contribution unravels the complex network of assumptions and reluctant opinions surrounding the emergence of female artistic needlework.

The first part of her article usefully reminds the reader of the general background in which women and needlework became closely associated in the 19th century, first by calling up the

image of the Sempstress as famously painted by Richard Redgrave and represented in Thomas Hood's hugely popular poem, *The Song of the Shirt*. Following the steps of Patricia Zakreski's fine analysis of the representation of the seamstress in her book *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890*, Gerrish-Nunn then shows the underlying contradictions in the perception of needlework according to its aspect and purpose. She thus notes that

> [f]or many if not most early Victorians, on the spectrum of creativity needlework was sited at one end and fine art at the other, even when needlework took its more decorative forms of embroidery, lace-making or tapestry.

In the course of her article, she shows that the negative reactions prompted by the exhibition of the Society of Female artists were justified by the strong prejudice against women's ability to create and infuse meaning into their artistic endeavours and men's anguish at the prospect of women working outside of the domestic circle. Her conclusion is that needlework was a potent touchstone of the version of womanhood that was being discussed throughout the 19th century.

By contrast, Rachel Dickinson's article, "Needlework and John Ruskin's 'acicular art of nations'," offers a much more balanced view of gender relations and needlework by casting light on three individuals whose interlinked communication involved the discussion of needlework: the eminent social critic John Ruskin, the well-known suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett and the hardly-known needlework teacher Kate Stanley. Dickinson argues that, contrary to the general – and mistaken – opinion that Ruskin was strongly misogynistic, his view of needlework as a model of universal art for the nation was forged through his growing interest in and knowledge of needlework, a knowledge he acquired from women who directly influenced his judgement through their own practice or teaching. Starting with the dedication lines to John Ruskin written by Kate Stanley in 1883, Dickinson's enquiry leads her to unravel many threads running in Ruskin's famously enigmatic and self-contradictory set of letters, *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884), which she aptly describes as a "Victorian blog."

Picking up one thread at a time, she first sets up the broad context of Ruskin's general argument to demonstrate how he "utilises cloth and its products to teach lessons in political economy" (a metaphorical reference to dress which may also be found in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*); she then highlights the soft transition made by the critic between the macro level and the micro level of economy and the way he uses the female, domestic sphere as a model to canvas and organise society's work and overall harmony. Within this frame, in which

"products of the needle rank second, behind food, in a taxonomy of human need," women stand as prominent agents who are not only the skilled practitioners of embroidery but also the main figures bringing about change in political economy and education. The point is first illustrated by Ruskin's reference to Fawcett's *Political Economy for Beginners* (1870), and then expanded upon in the second part of the article where Dickinson broadens her main argument to demonstrate how Ruskin's definition of a national curriculum owed much to Kate Stanley's expertise in needlework and teaching. The last section in her article broadens the scope of her investigation yet again by arguing that "[t]he importance of textiles for Ruskin's vision of education and social improvement can be seen in the fact that his ideal vision of a museum for workmen included a room dedicated to" what he then called the "acicular art of all the nations" – a scientific labelling that encompasses all forms of male and female needlework and very much foreshadows contemporary museum practices to be found in Sheffield's *Millennium Galleries*, where Ruskin's Guild of St George museum is now housed, as much as in today's *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London or the *Musée des Arts décoratifs* in Paris.

4. Modern Fibres

The two papers that form the middle section of this collection create a temporal link between the high Victorian setting of the previous essays, through the emergence of the Modern period and the span of the 20th century. Bridging the gap from the high Victorian period to the 1890s, Jane Spirit's "'She who would refine the fabric:' Contexts for Reading the Embroidering and Writing of Florence Farr and Una Taylor" considers the significance of "art embroidery" for the Arts and Crafts movement by exploring the artistic paths of two women writers of the mid-1890s, Florence Farr and Una Taylor. Her contribution nicely ties in with the previous one as it first states the continuity between Ruskin's educational ideas and the Arts and Crafts movement. Combined with Walter Pater's more individualistic aspiration towards art for art's sake in the Aesthetic movement, these two parallel movements explain what Talia Shaffer describes as "Aestheticism's emphasis on careful description of beautiful objects, its nostalgia for more art-conscious times, and its careful and visible crafting" (49). Spirit argues that women aesthetic writers who were also embroiderers can be seen as demonstrating "an engagement in contemporary theoretical and practical debate about art forms of all kinds," a point she makes by looking at how Farr and Taylor, who both worked in the entourage of

May Morris, were to "engage in debate about contemporary society, whether through satire as with Farr or through the Celtic revival as with Taylor."

The first part of Spirit's article draws a detailed picture of the aesthetic climate of the 1890s and shows the importance of embroidery in the development of female artistic production. Her wide-ranging investigation brings together historical elements such as the foundation of the Royal School of Art Needlework (1875), architectural projects (such as the development of the aesthetic suburb of Bedford Park) and the writings of key figures of literary criticism like William Morris, Oscar Wilde and Lucy Crane. Showing the mixed reactions to embroidery as a definitely artistic practice, she then turns more specifically to Farr and Taylor who both worked as professional embroiderers while pursuing artistic endeavours and demonstrates how their career paths was inseparable from their engagement with embroidery and needlework as an artistic mode of expression.

In "Worsted, Weave, and Web: The Cultural Struggles of the Fictional Knitting-Woman," Kathy Rees uses a late 20th century short story, A. S. Byatt's "Art Work," to shed light on the figure of the "knitting-woman" in a wide-ranging survey of novels spanning a century: 1840-1940. Attuned to the physicality of the women she writes about, Rees draws attention to their bodies: how they move, how they are staged, and how they attract, hide from or alter the angle of the male gaze. In turning her attention to detective fiction, she demonstrates how the presence of knitting-women in those texts helped females move into a previously male genre. Similarly, her reading of knitting in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* upsets expected norms in that knitting is equated there to imperial exploitation.

Noting that most scholarly engagement with needlework has, like the articles in this special issue, largely ignored knitting as a culturally meaningful form of needlework, Rees uses a range of literary knitting-women and the signs and symbols linked to them in order to outline changes in the position of women across class as well as race in the period under consideration. Just as the previous articles on embroidery and sewing grappled with the politics of gender, so too, does this one on knitting. In contrast to the view, common until the late 20th century, that knitting is amongst the most mundane of needle-arts, Rees traces mythic and biblical allusions linked to knitting across a spectrum of texts in order to illustrate the complexity and value of this form of typically feminine creativity which, in the hands of Byatt's Mrs Brown, is elevated to an "Art Work."

5. Wider Web

The final section of this thematic issue widens the scope of enquiry to consider needlework in the 21st century, now much more readily recognised as a form of art. The two concluding papers grapple with issues of creativity in a digital world. While the preceding article, by Rees, focused on fictional representations of women as needle-artists in the past, Kirsty Bell's "Reproduction as Genealogy in Anna Torma's Textile Art" is concerned with a living artist. Similarly, the geographical scope, previously largely focused on British authors, shifts: in this case, to Canada. Akin to Bell and other contributors to this volume, the bodies of women form a trope. Here, bodies figure in Torma's concerns with creation and reproduction, but are also present in the network of craftspeople whose presence is physically worked into Torma's pieces through acts of incorporating found objects.

Although Torma is an embroiderer, Bell draws attention to narrative and verbal aspects of her work. Starting with the "compelling story" of a lost – stolen – artwork titled *Everyday Poems*, the narrative of Torma's recreation of it for a retrospective exhibition offers a springboard to consider issues of intangible memory as well as the very physical and biological act of making in order to examine the notion of "reproduction" in textile art and in a digital world. As with most of the articles collected here, individual women's negotiation of expectations of gender and creativity figure prominently. Bell's focus is fixed on Torma, but the close analysis she offers of one figure opens to much wider – universal – issues in relation to influence, inheritance, incorporation: the works discussed incorporate and/or recreate pre-existing pieces. This magpie approach of interweaving found textiles, artistic influences from her biological family (ancestresses, children, husband) and "her own original embroideries […] create multi-level affiliations," interwoven genealogies, "resist[ing] a tidy hierarchical structure" such as one would normally expect in a genealogy. This interlinking of human, familial and artistic influence is, Bell demonstrates, replicated when Torma considers the natural world where "interdependence" coupled with a "celebration of the individual," biological human engaging with her world through creative needle acts is equally evident. Such work, she argues, reframes the issue of reproduction in art and in life; this world seen through the lens of Torma's textiles offers a different perspective on being human in the Anthropocene.

While Bell used Torma to address questions such as whether "the digital copy is a satisfactory substitute for the original," Amy Wells's "From Fiction to Video Games: Contemporary Needle Arts Across Genres" revels in the digital. Her essay demonstrates how women of the needle have become mainstream in popular culture, but often with a knowing 21st century subversive twist. For example, she shows that the stealthy movement of women into detective

fiction, which Rees notes had been smoothed in through the figure of the knitting-woman, has in the 21st century become celebrated and moved from the margins. This re-centring has given rise to sub-genres of "quilting mysteries" and "Knit Lit," wherein the needlework created is much more central to the plot and more fully described than in the 19th and 20th century antecedents. This, Wells argues, reflects a new interest in craft and making which runs parallel to and counter-cultural with the turn to digital lives. Like Bell, her focus is on a particular nation: here, the United States of America. Expanding her texts beyond traditional novels and genre fiction, Wells offers examples from magazines, DIY literature and video games to demonstrate the persistence, transformation and growth of needlecraft in the 21st century. Rather than needlecraft being positioned as art, which has been a recurring motif of this collection, her essay celebrates its rising status in popular culture.

6. Conclusion

In an interview about the future of textile studies, art curator Peter McNeill observes:

> There is a great opportunity to link the artisanal – embroidery, embellishment, textile experimentation, technology – with moral, ethical and social topics of interest to a new generation of viewers and consumers and the so-called contemporary "craftivism", the concept of ethical fashion, and "upcycling." (45)

Living in our fast-moving digital world, where so many items of clothing and decoration are mass-produced and devoid of singularity, the return to the handwoven basket, the hand-knitted scarf or the embroidered purse exemplifies our desire to return to a slower and simpler mode of living. At a time when prestigious and precious institutions such as the *Musée des Tissus* are still under threat of closure, there is something very comforting in the growing interest in needlework, embroidery and the stitched stories they tell.

Looking at the line of tourists slowly moving down the gallery of the Bayeux Tapestry in France, we are thus made aware that the glass case sheltering the ancient tapestry is not only a showcase but a mirror reflecting its viewers and blurring their distinctive features so as to make up a colourful chain of beings. Beyond the question of appropriation (this is, after all, the most significant extant piece of *Opus Anglicanum*, stitched when such needlework was the height of English medieval art), and even as it narrates a legend of conquest and defeat,

victory and failure, there is a sense that the embroidered work of art belongs to human kind and traces the pattern of life itself. A record of humanity, the piece ultimately echoes William Morris's intuition that beyond the fleeting existence of individuals, there is a pattern, that "life is not empty or made for nothing, and that the parts of it fit into one another is some way; and that the world goes on, beautiful and strange and dreadful and worshipful" (Mackail, 1.328, quoted in Arscott 103).

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